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WO 01/71578 A2

(54) Title: **METHOD, APPARATUS AND PROGRAM FOR ELECTRONIC COMMERCE**

(57) Abstract:

Method, Apparatus and Program for Electronic Commerce

5 This invention relates to electronic commerce, particularly but not exclusively using the Internet. The term electronic commerce includes on-line shopping for goods or services and on-line bill-paying, for example. The term Internet is to be construed broadly to include future electronic networks, whether or not based on the existing Internet infrastructure, as well as existing cellular and TV networks that can provide portals to the Internet. The term Internet site is also to be
10 construed to include not only websites but any software entity characterised by a unique Internet address.

15 The Internet comprises many computers linked one with another via a World wide communications network. It permits electronic commerce, sometimes called "on-line shopping", whereby customers using computer terminals, interactive digital television and/or mobile communication utilising Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) can access remote websites operated by respective suppliers and make purchases from those suppliers using ordering and payment facilities at those sites.

20 There are many advantages to electronic commerce but also some disadvantages. For example, customers are often wary of having to provide credit card details and other identifying information to suppliers with whom they are unfamiliar and they may be concerned that goods they have ordered may take a long time to be
25 delivered or not be delivered at all. The order forms which have to be filled in when a purchase is made are often cumbersome or they may not work for customers in a country different to that where the supplier is located. For example, the form may insist on entry of a US style 'Zip Code' or US state abbreviation and not accept the order unless it is provided. Furthermore there may be further
30 barriers due to customs restrictions, other local regulations, lack of customer support, and national suppliers' pricing régimes.

35 Furthermore, as of today, electronic commerce over the Internet is largely restricted to credit card transactions whereas certain groups of consumers (eg teenagers) have a considerable buying power but do not normally have credit cards. In certain countries credit card facilities are not readily available or acceptable or are only available to certain socio-economic groups, again excluding from electronic commerce substantial numbers of consumers with appreciable

buying power.

An object of the invention is to alleviate at least some of the above problems and concerns.

According to one aspect of the invention, there is provided a method of facilitating electronic commerce between a customer and a remote supplier in an Internet environment, the method comprising the steps of:

i) transferring to a local Internet site ordering or billing data originating from the remote supplier and relating to an order by or payment due from by the customer, and

ii) transmitting payment data corresponding to the ordering or billing data from said local Internet site to said remote supplier.

This has the advantages a) that the customer can deal with a local Internet site (by local is meant in the same country or at least in the same jurisdiction) to chase up his or her order and b) that it is not necessary for the customer to transfer credit card details to a supplier, whether located in the same country or jurisdiction as the customer or located in a foreign country or jurisdiction.

Furthermore the local Internet site can vet suppliers for reliability and ability to supply in a given jurisdiction, and can warn customers of those suppliers which cannot reliably meet their orders, for whatever reason. Hence electronic commerce is facilitated by making it secure, swift and with an assured fulfillment of an order. Optionally this last feature can be backed up by a warranty issued by the local Internet site.

It should be noted that the customer need not be a private individual but could be a business for example. Furthermore the customer need not place an order but could pay a bill, for example a utility bill (eg gas or electricity) or indeed a credit card bill from his or her credit card issuer.

In one embodiment said payment data comprises a credit issued for or by the local Internet site and distinct from any credit of the customer. In this embodiment the

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local Internet site acts as a facilitator and thus shields the customer against fraud by the supplier or hackers who gain access to the supplier. In this embodiment the local Internet site (facilitator) pays the supplier and the customer pays the local Internet site (facilitator) in an on-line back-to-back transaction that suits both the customer and the supplier.

In another embodiment said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued for or by the local Internet site (facilitator) in the name of the customer and being associated exclusively with a particular order to said supplier. This prevents the credit card data being fraudulently used by a third party for another transaction.

In another embodiment said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued for or by the local Internet site (facilitator) in the name of the customer and limited to the value of the order. This again prevents fraudulent use of credit card data, either by a third party or by the supplier.

In another embodiment said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued for or by the local Internet site (facilitator) in the name of the customer and limited to a particular date or period. This again prevents fraudulent use of credit card data, either by a third party or by the supplier.

In certain embodiments the customer could transfer credit (either directly or by authorising a charge to the local Internet site each time the nominee makes an order, up to an agreed limit) from the local Internet site (facilitator) to at least one other person nominated by the customer and the nominee(s) would be informed, eg by an email, by the local Internet site of the credit transfer. The information sent to the nominee(s) could for example include a serial number or other identifier of the credit (to be used every time the nominee buys goods or services or pays bills with the credit) and an indication of the amount of the credit. The local Internet site (facilitator) could inform the nominee of the level of credit remaining at any stage in a transaction.

For each order or payment requested by a nominee, the local Internet site (facilitator) will issue a credit to the supplier on behalf of the nominee, provided that there is sufficient credit held on behalf of the nominee by the local Internet site.

5 The credit could for example be in the form of a credit card data which would be processed by the normal credit card clearing system or it could for example be any other form of payment such as a wire transfer (eg SWIFT), a cheque or banker's draft or even cash (whether in electronic form as currently used on the Internet or conventional physical currency).

10 In order to provide further security, particularly against telesales fraud, the credit issued for or by the local Internet site (facilitator) could be a credit card number in a fictitious name which would be ignored by the supplier and credit card clearance system but which would be detected in the event of attempted fraudulent use following interception of the credit card number and name during transmission over the Internet.

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In order to provide further reassurance to the customer, the local Internet site (facilitator) preferably provides (eg by means of a web form created by appropriate software at the local Internet site) a warranty to the customer that the goods or services ordered will indeed be supplied.

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In practice a customer will typically:

25 access a supplier's electronic commerce computer site and select an item to purchase;

receive from said supplier's site data specifying the selection and pass such data to a further computer site, and

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confirm the order to the further computer site to cause the order to be passed automatically from the further computer site to the supplier's site along with payment details relating to the purchase and address of the customer.

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A further restriction on electronic commerce is the lack of access to Internet facilities among substantial groups of the population.

In one embodiment the customer communicates with the local Internet site by non-Internet means, eg by telephone, facsimile transmission or by post.

According to another aspect of the invention there is provided a computer program loaded into or capable of being loaded into a computer and operable in association with an Internet browser for facilitating an electronic commerce transaction in an Internet environment, the program comprising:

i) means for transferring to a further Internet site distinct from any site of the supplier ordering or billing data originating from the supplier and relating to an order by the customer, and

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ii) means for transmitting payment data corresponding to the ordering or billing data from said further Internet site to said supplier.

In a preferred embodiment the program comprises means for automatically issuing to the supplier details of a credit in the name of the customer such that the supplier is enabled to obtain payment through a recognised credit card payment clearing system.

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According to a third aspect of the invention there is provided apparatus for carrying out electronic commerce, the apparatus comprising:

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means for accessing a supplier's electronic commerce computer site and selecting an item to purchase;

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means for receiving from said supplier's site data specifying the selection and passing such data to a further computer site, and

means for confirming said order to cause the order to be passed automatically from the further computer site to the supplier's site along with payment details relating to the purchase.

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Preferred features of the invention are defined in the dependent claims.

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A preferred embodiment of the invention is described below by way of example only with reference to Figures 1 and 2 of the accompanying drawing, wherein:

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Figure 1 is a diagram for explaining how a customer may be linked with one or more on-line shopping websites and a local assistant facility via the Internet; and

5 Figure 2 is a flow chart illustrating a series of steps making up an on-line shopping transaction.

10 The Internet comprises a vast number of computers linked one with another via a world-wide complex communications network comprising many different technologies, for example over land lines, radio and satellite links and using equipment such as routers for directing data between the different computers. Some of the computers will support supplier's electronic commerce websites while others will be owned by or be accessible to prospective customers. The computers may comprise Internet servers permanently connected to the communications
15 network. One or more of them may be components of local or wide area networks connected into the Internet via further computers acting as Internet servers or gateways. Also some of the computers may be linked via telephone modems and the local telephone system to computer servers operated by Internet Service Providers (ISP's).
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The technology involved in the Internet is still developing. For example, it is already possible for prospective customers to access the Internet via interactive television and even some types of mobile telephone (as referred to above) provided
25 they are signed up with an appropriate service provider. As far as these customers may know, they are not using a computer as such although of course somewhere along the line a computer or computing facility will be involved. The following description refers to computers but it will be appreciated that some different form of terminal, for example a digital interactive television or mobile telephone, may
30 be involved (especially in the case of a prospective customer).

Figure 1 shows just a small portion of the Internet with three websites SW1, SW2 and SW3 located at respective computers 1, 2 and 3 and operated by respective
35 different electronic commerce suppliers. Computer 4 belongs to a prospective customer and computer 5 supports a further website LAF operated by a Local Assistance Facility of which the function is to be described subsequently herein. The computers might (but need not) be in different locations, jurisdictions, countries or states. However, in general, the Local Assistance Facility is expected

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to be in the same country or jurisdiction as the prospective customer while the suppliers are likely to be in different countries or jurisdictions. The computers are able to send and receive data from and to each other via the Internet communications network shown as a cloud symbol 6.

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Also shown in Figure 1 are a series of paths 7 to 13 illustrating how information flows between the computers 1 to 5 in this embodiment of the invention. They do not represent physical connections. The latter will be in one of the forms described earlier. For example, Computer 4 might be connected to a modem and local telephone line to an ISP's computer (not shown) while computers 1 to 3 and 5 might be Internet servers.

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At present, when a customer wishes to make a purchase from a supplier's website, he or she accesses that site, chooses a product to buy and fills in a more or less complex order form. Subsequently, if the customer wishes to confirm the purchase, he completes the transaction by paying for the product, usually by supplying details of his credit card and shipping address. The supplier then arranges delivery of the product to the customer. The site may have a 'shopping basket' facility whereby the customer can choose several products in turn from the same site and then pay for all of them as a single transaction.

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Referring now to Figures 1 and 2, in this embodiment of the invention, the website LAF operated by the local assistance facility is also involved. The function of the local assistance facility is to help the customer, with his or her authority, by making a contribution to the transaction. This is done by way making use of software loaded into the customer's computer. The software may be loaded from a CD-ROM provided to the customer by the local assistance facility, it may have been pre-loaded onto a new computer purchased by the customer, or it may have been downloaded for future use by the customer from the website LAF, for example. Alternatively, just before or during an electronic commerce transaction, a customer may access the website LAF and download the software for one time use during that transaction. In the case of an interactive television or mobile telephone, the software may be part of the service provider's Internet access facility.

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The function of the software is to assist swiftly in a transaction carried out between the customer and supplier and to de-link the transactions of the customer and the

supplier. When the customer has accessed one of the websites SW1 to SW3 (step 100, Figure 2, flow path 7, 8 or 9 in Figure 1), and has selected an item for purchase (step 110, Figure 2), the order and credit card details (or other payment data if a credit card is not used) are transferred, not to the relevant supplier's site, but instead to the website LAF (step 120, Figure 2) via flow path 10 in Figure 1 where they are recorded in a 'shopping basket' provided as part of that site. The customer is preferably given the option of leaving his/her details with the LAF. The customer can send an order to the LAF site immediately (step 160, path 125, Figure 2) if he or she wishes. Otherwise the customer may if he/she wishes to do so, access the same or a different one of the websites SW1 to SW3 and make a further purchase (decision 130 in Figure 2). If the customer decides to make a further purchase, the order is then again recorded in the 'shopping basket' at the website LAF by returning to step 100 (Figure 2). Thus, the customer is able to select more than one purchase from different supplier sites without going through the full ordering process each time.

In each case the customer is given an opportunity to modify his or her transactions at a given supplier's site (step 140, Figure 2). At each stage the customer is given the opportunity to revert to the preceding stage (paths 105, 115, Figure 2) Once the customer has completed his/her purchases, and has confirmed to the website LAF that he/she wishes to buy them, the customer is given an opportunity to suspend the entire transaction (decision 150, Figure 2) which involves going off-line, storing the transaction details on his/her computer and emailing or otherwise messaging the website LAF (step 180, Figure 2) to that effect so that the transaction can be resumed on a later occasion (path 190, Figure 2) without repeating the procedure albeit possibly with a modified list of items following a further access of one or more of the suppliers' sites SW1 to SW3 (path 185, Figure 2).

Otherwise the orders are completed by the transfer of the orders from the website LAF to the different supplier's sites along with payment details (step 160, Figure 2 and flow paths 11, 12 and 13, Figure 1). Confirmation of the order is requested from the suppliers by the website LAF (step 170, Figure 2) and that confirmation is then sent on automatically to the customer.

As shown in Figure 2, the LAF site can accept non-Internet orders placed eg by telephone or even by post (step 200) in which case the confirmation sent to the

customer (step 160) will for example be by non-Internet means of communication.

5 As mentioned above, the website LAF is operated by a local assistance facility which is intended to be provided locally to a customer or group of possible customers or at least to be easily available to those customers. For example, the facility may take the form of an office or call centre in say the United Kingdom and be available via a local telephone number to residents there. The advantage then is that customers would be able to check on the progress of their orders and/or report non-fulfillment of an order without having to make expensive international
10 calls to unfamiliar suppliers and with the possibility of language difficulties or idiomatic misunderstandings. Meanwhile, the office or call centre staff would be able to add value by using their experience of dealing with different suppliers around the world.

15 The website LAF itself need not be in the same country as the local assistance facility. For example, the website could be in one country and there could be set up several offices in different countries all making use of that same website. In fact, especially given that it is possible for local call facilities or even freephone numbers to be made available to customers in different countries or states, a single
20 call centre say may be provided for the use of those customers with automatic diversion to an answering service in the language of the customer's home country.

25 As well as the advantage of being able to make purchases from different suppliers' sites using a single 'shopping basket' at the website LAF, the basic embodiment described above is able to be developed to provide additional facilities. For example, instead of the customer's own credit card details being passed to the supplier, the local assistance facility may operate as a credit card issuer. Then, each time that a payment is to be transferred to a supplier, for example just after a
30 customer has confirmed a purchase, the website LAF may automatically issue a credit card in the name of the customer and showing a credit corresponding to the amount of the payment (but possibly including commission) and not usable for any other transaction. In another embodiment the LAF can bill the customer and pay
35 the supplier in an on-line back-to back transaction.

By credit card is here meant only the electronic details of that card, not the card itself which does not exist as a physical item. The card details are then sent to the

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supplier while the credited amount is billed to the customer's personal credit card through the usual credit card billing system.

5 One advantage of this process is that the customer can be absolutely certain that his card details will not be used to make further payments which he has not authorised while another is that it forms a efficient process for enabling the local assistance facility to offer credit to the customer. Alternatively the amount can be debited immediately to the customer's own credit card if preferred.

10 Furthermore, not only are the financial transactions between the customer and the supplier de-linked by the website LAF but also the latter guarantees to the customer the fulfillment of the order.

15 Instead of the whole of the order details being passed by the customer's computer to the website LAF after the customer has selected an item to purchase from the supplier's site, all of the order apart from the payment information may be left at the supplier's site. The website LAF then acts only to transfer the payment information to the supplier's site.

20 In a further variant shown in Figure 1, the customer 4 instructs the LAF 5 to transfer credit (eg in the form of a serial number to a nominee 15 who can then take the place of the customer in steps 100 to 170 of Figure 2).

25 The website LAF can be provided with software accessible to the customer's browser to enable groups of customers to communicate instantaneously by email (in a manner analagous to Internet chat rooms) - grouped for example on the basis of the types of items the customers are seeking to buy. The website LAF can also incorporate a search engine and other tools for guiding the customer - eg for the
30 best price or shortest delivery time of a given item. Other information about suppliers' websites can also be given - eg degree of customer satisfaction or any problems with delivery or quality.

35 In another embodiment the website LAF could amalgamate several (preferably identical) orders from different customers and pass on the resulting combined order to one or more suppliers eg a third party auction site in order to obtain improved terms by bulk buying.

The processing of the orders and the negotiation or auctioning can take place simultaneously. By the time the auction is due to take place or the negotiations are nearly completed, the website LAF will hold firm orders with payment details.

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Claims

1. A method of facilitating electronic commerce between a customer and a remote supplier in an Internet environment, the method comprising the steps of:
- 5 i) transferring to a local Internet site ordering or billing data originating from the remote supplier and relating to an order by or payment due from by the customer, and
- 10 ii) transmitting payment data corresponding to the ordering or billing data from said local Internet site to said remote supplier.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said payment data comprises a credit issued for or by the local Internet site and distinct from any credit of the customer.
- 15 3. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued in the name of the customer and being associated exclusively with a particular order or bill payment to said supplier.
- 20 4. A method as claimed in claim 1 or claim 3 wherein said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued in the name of the customer and limited to the value of the order or bill payment.
- 25 5. A method as claimed in any of claims 1, 3 and 4 wherein said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued for or by the local Internet site in the name of the customer and limited to a particular date or period.
- 30 6. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein said local Internet site issues a guarantee that an order placed by the customer will be fulfilled.
7. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the customer communicates with the local Internet site to place the order or make the bill payment by non-Internet means.
- 35 8. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the local Internet site passes on credit received from a customer to a nominee selected by the customer to

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enable the nominee to carry out transactions with that credit.

5 9. A method as claimed in any preceding claim wherein the local Internet site amalgamates a multiplicity of orders from different customers and transmits a bulk order to one or more suppliers.

10 10. A computer program loaded into or capable of being loaded into a computer and operable in association with an Internet browser for facilitating an electronic commerce transaction in an Internet environment, the program comprising:

i) means for transferring to a further Internet site distinct from any site of the supplier ordering or billing data originating from the supplier and relating to an order by the customer, and

15 ii) means for transmitting payment data corresponding to the ordering or billing data from said further Internet site to said supplier.

20 11. A computer program as claimed in claim 10 wherein said means for transmitting payment data comprises means for issuing a virtual credit on behalf of the customer, the virtual credit card being associated exclusively with a particular order to said supplier.

25 12. A computer program as claimed in claim 9 or claim 10 wherein said means for transmitting payment data comprises means for issuing a virtual credit on behalf of the customer, the virtual credit card being limited to the value of the order.

30 13. A computer program as claimed in any of claims 10 to 12 wherein said payment data comprises a virtual credit issued by the local Internet site in the name of the customer and limited to a particular date or period.

35 14. A computer program as claimed in any of claims 10 to 13 which comprises means for automatically issuing to the supplier details of a credit in the name of the customer such that the supplier is enabled to obtain payment through a recognised credit card payment clearing system.

15. Apparatus for carrying out electronic commerce, the apparatus comprising:

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means for accessing a supplier's electronic commerce computer site and selecting an item to purchase;

5 means for receiving from said supplier's site data specifying the selection and passing such data to a further computer site;

means for confirming said order to cause the order to be passed automatically from the further computer site to the supplier's site along with payment details relating
10 to the purchase.

16. Apparatus as claimed in claim 15 when programmed with a program as claimed in any of claims 10 to 14.

15 17. A method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 9 when performed by means of apparatus as claimed in claim 15 or claim 16.

18. A method of facilitating electronic commerce substantially as described
20 hereinabove with reference to Figures 1 and 2 of the accompanying drawing.

19. Apparatus for performing electronic commerce substantially as described hereinabove with reference to Figures 1 and 2 of the accompanying drawing
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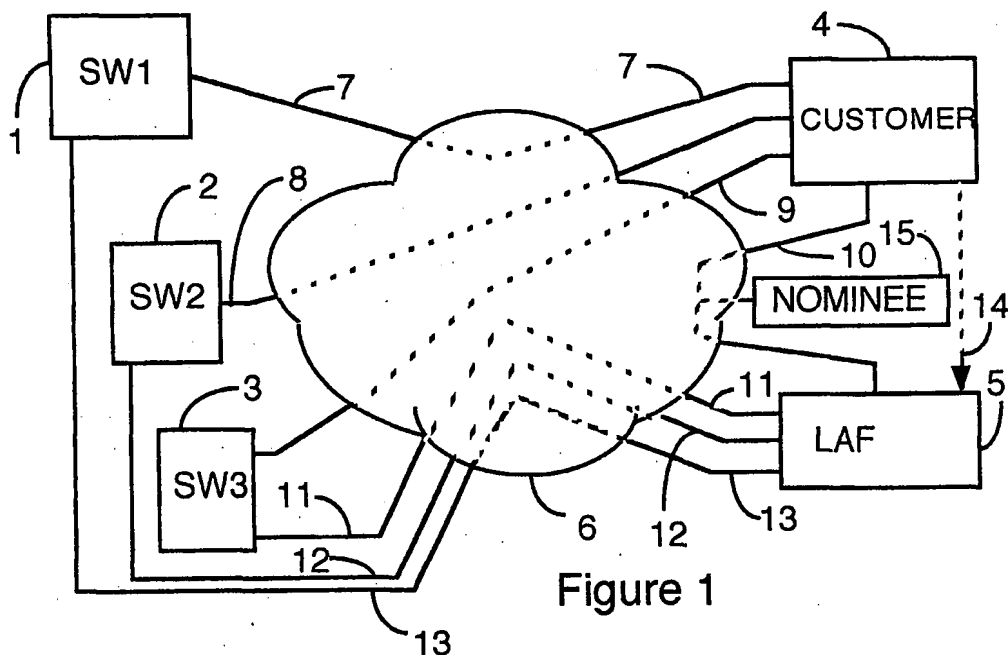


Figure 1

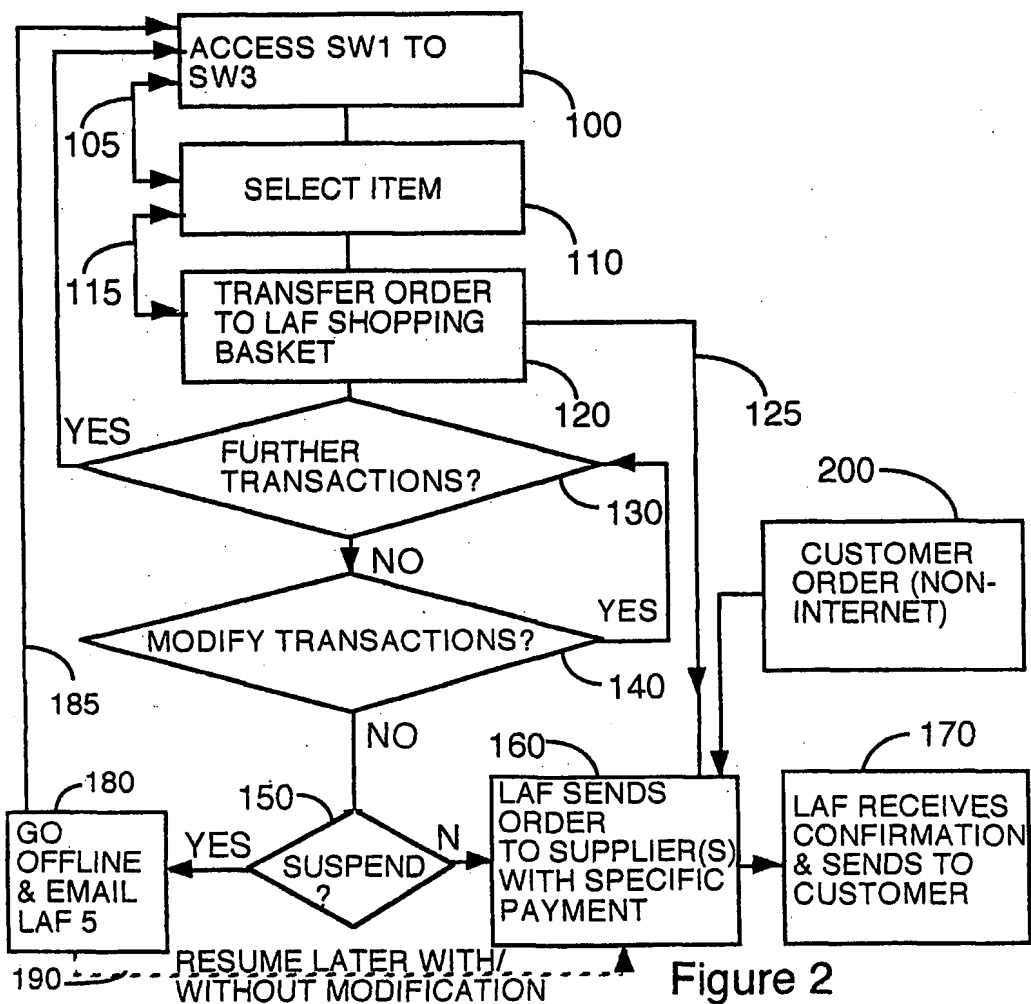


Figure 2

PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

PCT

DECLARATION OF NON-ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

(PCT Article 17(2)(a), Rules 13ter.1(c) and Rule 39)

Applicant's or agent's file reference	IMPORTANT DECLARATION	Date of mailing(day/month/year) 16/07/2001
International application No. PCT/GB 01/ 01275	International filing date(day/month/year) 23/03/2001	(Earliest) Priority date(day/month/year) 23/03/2000
International Patent Classification (IPC) or both national classification and IPC G06F17/60		
Applicant BEN-HAIM, Amit et al.		


This International Searching Authority hereby declares, according to Article 17(2)(a), that no international search report will be established on the international application for the reasons indicated below

1. ☐ The subject matter of the international application relates to:
 - a. ☐ scientific theories.
 - b. ☐ mathematical theories
 - c. ☐ plant varieties.
 - d. ☐ animal varieties.
 - e. ☐ essentially biological processes for the production of plants and animals, other than microbiological processes and the products of such processes.
 - f. ☐ schemes, rules or methods of doing business.
 - g. ☐ schemes, rules or methods of performing purely mental acts.
 - h. ☐ schemes, rules or methods of playing games.
 - i. ☐ methods for treatment of the human body by surgery or therapy.
 - j. ☐ methods for treatment of the animal body by surgery or therapy.
 - k. ☐ diagnostic methods practised on the human or animal body.
 - l. ☐ mere presentations of information.
 - m. ☐ computer programs for which this International Searching Authority is not equipped to search prior art.
2. ☒ The failure of the following parts of the international application to comply with prescribed requirements prevents a meaningful search from being carried out:

☐ the description
☒ the claims
☐ the drawings
3. ☐ The failure of the nucleotide and/or amino acid sequence listing to comply with the standard provided for in Annex C of the Administrative Instructions prevents a meaningful search from being carried out:

☐ the written form has not been furnished or does not comply with the standard.
☐ the computer readable form has not been furnished or does not comply with the standard.
4. Further comments:

see further information sheet

Name and mailing address of the International Searching Authority  European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL-2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Tx. 31 651 epo nl, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016	Authorized officer Roger Thomas
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Form PCT/ISA/203 (July 1998)

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED FROM PCT/ISA/ 203

The claims relate to subject matter for which no search is required according to Rule 39 PCT. Given that the claims are formulated in terms of such subject matter or merely specify commonplace features relating to its technological implementation, the search examiner could not establish any technical problem which might potentially have required an inventive step to overcome. Hence it was not possible to carry out a meaningful search into the state of the art (Art. 17(2)(a)(i) and (ii) PCT).

The applicant's attention is drawn to the fact that claims relating to inventions in respect of which no international search report has been established need not be the subject of an international preliminary examination (Rule 66.1(e) PCT). The applicant is advised that the EPO policy when acting as an International Preliminary Examining Authority is normally not to carry out a preliminary examination on matter which has not been searched. This is the case irrespective of whether or not the claims are amended following receipt of the search report or during any Chapter II procedure. If the application proceeds into the regional phase before the EPO, the applicant is reminded that a search may be carried out during examination before the EPO (see EPO Guideline C-VI, 8.5), should the problems which led to the Article 17(2) declaration be overcome.